Self-Direction in a Changing World
Learning Objectives

After completing this chapter, you should be able to

1. Explain how technology is changing the way we communicate and live.
2. Describe several characteristics of our postindustrial society.
3. Discuss other recent social changes unrelated to technology.
4. Explain Fromm’s notion of human freedom, why freedom causes us anxiety, and how freedom relates to personal growth.
5. Discuss what it means to take charge of your life and give examples of various aspects of taking charge.
6. Understand several personal traits and which ones are likely to change throughout adulthood, if at all.
7. Describe the three-phase cycle by which we experience personal growth.

Change has always been an important part of our American way of life. To understand the impact of change, let’s meet two college students, Zachary and Karen, related by blood but separated by over 100 years. Zachary is a freshman in college in the late 1800s. He is among the privileged few to attend college, mostly because his family is sufficiently well off to send him to school. Zachary travels to college by train, passing through miles of farmland and forests along the way. He keeps in touch with his family by letters. Zachary hopes to be a physician, an occupation pretty much closed to women in the 1800s. A few women do attend Zachary’s college but major in home economics, teacher education, and more traditional female majors. Zachary lives at a boardinghouse for male college students. He takes his meals there but studies at the library, where he reads by gaslight. There are no computers or other technology such as photocopiers in the library. Zachary goes to the librarian to find what he needs. He hand-copies everything and also writes papers by hand. No one, absolutely no one, is using a mobile phone in Zachary’s library.

Karen, Zachary’s great-granddaughter, is a first-year college student of the twenty-first century. Since her parents’ divorce, she has lived with her mother and sister. She is able to attend college mostly because of financial aid from private lenders and the government. Karen travels back and forth to college by plane several times a year, passing over the megalopolis on the East Coast that covers several hundred miles. To keep in touch with her family, she has only to pick up her walkie-talkie enabled phone or send a text message. Electricity lights up the room in which Karen reads and powers the
computer she uses for term papers and correspondence. She is very glad that
the computer checks her spelling and grammar. Karen lives in a coed dor-
mitory, something absolutely taboo in Zachary’s day. Karen is accustomed to
mingling with students from different ethnic and racial groups on campus,
and about half of them are women. In Karen’s dining hall, genetically engi-
neered tomatoes are occasionally served along with chicken and beef that
have been infused with flavor enhancers. Karen uses the library as Zachary
did, but she is fortunate to have an electronic card catalog, photocopiers,
electronic article downloads, and access to the information highway known
as the World Wide Web. Karen hopes to be a physician, as did Zachary. She,
however, wants to specialize in gynecology, something Zachary would never
dream of. Zachary planned to be a general practitioner who would visit the
homes of his patients. Zachary knew some patients could not give him
money, so he would take produce, wool, or other products in payment.
Karen, on the other hand, wants a posh office, working hours from 9 a.m. to
5 p.m., and an answering service so she can enjoy her private life. She knows
she will set up her financial accounting system to accept credit cards, not
eggs and bacon.

SOCIAL CHANGE

Living in a Technological World

Both Zachary and Karen have lived in periods of rapid social change. Social changes
are changes in social patterns and institutions in society. Social change can occur in any time
period and be planned in advance or totally unplanned (Moritsugu, Wong, & Duffy,
2010). Planned changes are those created and engineered by humans, for example, build-
ing a new housing development wired for the most current technology. Unplanned
changes are created by nature or by social accident, such as tsunamis and hurricanes or
unexpected shifts in the population of a country due to disease or famine.

In Zachary’s lifetime, America slowly transformed from an agrarian society to an
urban one, and numerous inventions of the industrial revolution made transporta-
tion, farming, and manufacturing better and easier. Shortly, America was transformed
from a frontier society to an industrial giant. Karen, in turn, takes technological
change for granted. She believes that medical advances will soon have a cure for
many life-threatening illnesses, including AIDS and cancer. She worries that the
shortages of fossil fuels in addition to increased greenhouse gases are changing
the world she knows. Greenhouse gases are gases that are naturally occurring or man-made
and that trap heat in the earth’s atmosphere. Meanwhile, she has learned that spiraling
social change is normal and inevitable, although she occasionally wonders what lies
ahead. Karen knows that social change is not always planned or positive.

All of us now realize that the galloping rate of technological, scientific, and social
change occurs worldwide and has far-reaching (global) consequences. Social change
seems to be a pervasive condition of our time (Moritsugu, Wong, & Duffy, 2010), and technology has expanded interconnectedness of peoples and increased awareness of a common, global humanity (Stepinsky, 2005). Figure 1–1 reveals the steep increase in computer and Internet use in U.S. households.

Technology makes relationships among people more fluid, flexible, and portable and has freed us from the constraints of being in only one place. Technology connects us to more people more of the time; it also equips us to work both at home and at our job sites, blurring the boundaries between them (Jackson, 2005). Technology, in fact, may be the most powerful engine of change in today’s world (Sood & Tellis, 2005). People in almost every country are growing up in a world of greater interdependence because of technology. The revolution in communication, in particular, is re-creating the world in the image of a “global village,” in which every aspect of life—every thought, act, and institution—is being reconsidered in light of what is happening to people in other parts of the world (Alterman, 1999; Shah, 2007).

Although people recognize the fact of change, they often disagree on the direction (better or worse) in which we’re headed ((Kohut & Wike, 2008; Shah, 2007). Some assume that the world as we know it will last indefinitely and that all the changes around us will not shake the familiar social, economic, and political structures that hold our society together (Moen & Roehling, 2005). A larger proportion of people, however, fed by a steady diet of bad news about crime, economic problems, world crises, the threats

![Household Computer and Internet Access 1994 to 2007](image_url)

**Figure 1–1**

*Household computer and Internet access in the United States: 1984 to 2007.*

of terrorism, natural disasters, and possible nuclear destruction, have adopted a bleaker view (Huddy, Khatib, & Capelos, 2002). And yet others worry that digitalization and technology will damage or threaten local cultures and economies (Shah, 2007). Additionally, many forms of employment will be affected by automation and computerized systems. The increasing need for technical solutions places a premium on intellectual and technical knowledge. In turn, educated, middle-class workers will make up a larger proportion of the workforce in comparison to blue-collar workers, at least in the United States.

One major problem related to increasing people’s knowledge and use of technology, however, is that some people fear technology. Such fear is called technophobia (Moritsugu, Wong, & Duffy, 2010). For example, some people are apprehensive about using computers because they fear they will break the computers, make costly errors, or look stupid. The gap between use of computers by men and women seems to have narrowed (Cooper, 2006; Popovich, Gullekson, Morris, & Morse, 2008; Wasserman & Richmond-Abbott, 2005). Other marginalized individuals, however, who are uneducated, poor, elderly, disabled, Hispanic or African American (Karavides, Lim, & Katsikas, 2005; Mehra, Merkel, & Bishop, 2004; Moritsugu, Wong, & Duffy, 2010; National Science Foundation, 2003; Wasserman & Richmond-Abbott, 2005), or live in rural areas (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2002) are less likely to use computers.

This has created a seeming digital divide. As mentioned above, except for women whose frequency of use of technology has recently become more similar to men’s (Cooper, 2006; Popovich, Gullekson, Morris, & Morse, 2008; Wasserman & Richmond-Abbott, 2005) but whose anxiety about technology remains higher than men’s (Zeidner & Matthews, 2005) and whose types of use (e.g., email versus web searches) is different from men’s (Pierce & Boekelheide, 2008), those individuals who are already less powerful use technology least; they are perhaps the very individuals who could benefit from knowledge about technology in order to improve their jobs, social standing, and economic conditions (Mehra et al., 2004).

Interestingly, however, the overall technology picture is changing. Horrigan (2008) reports that mobile or “on the go” technology (cell phones and other wireless handhelds) is reducing this digital divide. Specifically, Horrigan reports that more and more senior citizens, economically disadvantaged individuals, African Americans, and Hispanics, who have generally lagged behind White men in usage, have cell phones. In fact, for use of non-voice applications (e.g., texting, photographing, and emailing) on handhelds, Hispanics and African Americans lead the way relative to White Americans. Can you think of some reasons for these new trends in technological use? These technological changes, along with other scientific discoveries, are moving Americans, Canadians, Koreans, Swedes, and other technologically advanced societies away from manufacturing and industry to service-oriented and technological employment just as the Industrial Revolution moved Zachary’s generation from agricultural to manufacturing jobs. For an interesting summary of other ways in which technology has changed our world, see Table 1–1 (page 6).

Living with Other Social Changes

The world seems much smaller to Karen than it did to Zachary. Karen can zip an email to a college friend who resides in Ireland. Karen can view the news about Iran, Russia, Peru, and Kenya on television or even on her mobile phone. Karen also hears about the cloning of animals and stem cell research, which interests her intensely because it relates to medicine. Karen can visit the supermarket and watch the scanned price of each item rapidly appear. Karen can take digital photos with her mobile phone, edit them, and zap them in
### Table 1–1

**The Social/Cultural Dimension of the Information Revolution: How the World Has Changed**

- More information flowing among people and countries with less obstruction and fewer delays
- Information flowing regardless of distance
- Increased opportunities for economic cooperation across borders
- Greater opportunities for businesses and individuals to profit globally
- The erosion or difficulty of censorship in certain countries with a history of censorship
- People being inundated with vast quantities of information
- The democratization of information [e.g., people voicing their opinions more freely (i.e., blogging)]
- Greater awareness of prosperity and poverty in our own country or elsewhere in the world
- A growing information gap between wealthy and poor individuals and nations

*Source: Alterman (1999).*

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An instant to multiple friends. Zachary had no such abilities or knowledge. In Zachary’s day, word traveled via itinerate workers such as doctors and blacksmiths or by rural dwellers visiting town to obtain provisions they could not grow or make themselves.

What other changes can we expect in today’s global village? One additional change will be continued population expansion and attendant worries about the health of our environment, including sufficient water and arable land, increased pollution, poverty, unemployment, and a plethora of related problems. The world population stands at over 6.7 billion (as of May 1, 2009; see the World POPClock at the U.S. Census Bureau website), with almost 150 new people born every minute. Furthermore, pollution as well as exhaustion of natural resources are problems for all countries and are contributed to by our increasing population. As mentioned above, another dramatic change will be the increase in the diversity of the population in the United States. Table 1–2 documents some of these historic changes. Beyond the data in the table, the U.S. Census Bureau

### Table 1–2

**Changes in Our Population**

As you can determine from this table, the percentage of the population made up by minorities as identified by the U.S. Census Bureau is increasing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>1990—% of total</th>
<th>2007—% of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>75.6</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic*</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Alaska Native</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race other than above</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more races</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Hispanics are the fastest growing segment of our population.

projects that by 2042 minorities will no longer be “minorities” and that by 2050 they collectively will represent 54 percent of the population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2008). An increasing number of immigrants from various regions of the world are entering this country, too. They bring a wealth of cultural ideas, languages, and customs. Accommodating these individuals will not be easy (Lamb, 2009), in particular because some Americans are closed-minded and rather ignorant of, insensitive to, or bigoted about people from other cultures. Because of increasing cultural diversity in this country, that is, the increase in the number of cultures, this book offers information about various racial and ethnic groups in America and how they uniquely cope with problems of adjustment. Where possible, information about other countries and cultures is also introduced. Similarly, we will also include valuable information on men and women.

How Certain Is Our Future?

How each of us understands the changes and trends in today’s world is somewhat like the proverbial question of whether we perceive a partly filled glass as half empty or half full. Pessimists tend to see the glass as half empty; optimists see it as half full. Social forecasters, who speculate on our long-term future, admit that we live in uncertain times—both good and bad (Kohut & Wike, 2008). They nevertheless project a fairly optimistic future. Although they do not necessarily agree on what the future holds for us (Kohut & Wike), they typically see it as promising.

Social forecasters view many of the problems of our time as the growing pains of success rather than the harbingers of doom. While the problems of overcrowding, unemployment, environmental pollution, social inequality, and poverty cannot be dismissed, such issues perhaps should be seen as temporary phenomena with which society must deal rather than the inevitable foreshadowing of the end of civilization. Societies can and do rebound from problems that at the time appear to be insurmountable (Moritsugu, Wong, & Duffy, 2010).

Self-Direction and Society

These rapid social changes and the growing importance of information and access to technology heighten the challenge of self-direction, which is the need to learn more about ourselves and our world as a means of directing our lives more effectively. Self-direction helps us respond to many life events—such as technological advances—as either a threat or a challenge. For example, like Karen, the young woman you met in the opening vignette, some individuals find using computers to be exciting and challenging; they purposely seek them out and try to learn more about them. Others view computers as a threat or complain about having to use them.

Another issue is that the world is seemingly changing and shrinking, in large part due to the technological changes discussed earlier. Given this, there are bound to be cultural clashes, disputes, and sometimes out-and-out warfare. On a daily basis, people from one society are bound to conflict with or misunderstand others from a different society (Moritsugu, Wong, & Duffy, 2010). Here’s a specific cultural example. Park, Lee, and Song (2005) studied SPAM (electronic advertising) sent to U.S. and Korean citizens. The Korean SPAMS included apologies for the unsolicited advertising; the U.S. ones did not. Koreans, therefore, might well think Americans rude for complaining about any unsolicited American advertisements Koreans receive.
The study of culture, then, is extremely important to our understanding of one another; thus, you should try to better understand cultural differences (Bucher, 2009). To that end, one commonly used system for classifying cultures is via the orientation taken toward the individual in that culture. **Individualistic societies**, referred to throughout this text, are societies in which individual gain is appreciated more than general societal gain. Individualistic societies are sometimes referred to as independent or autonomous cultures, where the sense of self is developed based on privately held attitudes, preferences, and judgments (Kitayama & Uchida, 2005; Matsumoto, 2007). Another term for individualistic culture is individual-level culture (Matsumoto, 2003, 2007). Individualistic societies can be contrasted to **collectivist societies**, in which collective or societal gain is cherished over individual advancement. Collectivist societies are also known as interdependent societies (Matsumoto, 2007), where the sense of self is based on attitudes, preferences, and judgments held by others (Kitayama & Uchida, 2005). Another way to refer to collectivistic cultures is as consensual-level (or group-level) or embedded cultures (Matsumoto, 2003, 2007). Thus, the pressure to conform to group or cultural pressures in collectivist societies is far greater than in individualistic societies.

In contrast to U.S. and Canadian society, many Eastern and Asian cultures remain collectivist societies. Some contemporary scientists argue, however, that the contrasts are not as sharp between individualistic and collectivistic societies as once thought (Oishi, Hahn, Schimmack, Radhakrishan, Dzokoto, & Ahadi, 2005; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Ask yourself whether this could be because of the technological revolution we are experiencing today. In the same vein, it is important to remember that any label applied to a culture cannot and does not capture the individual variations that exist within that culture (Matsumoto, 2003, 2007). For example, there is culture-level consensus in the United States about the value of egalitarianism, but in reality, life for many Americans is not very egalitarian (Matsumoto, 2003). Another case in point is that at the societal level we agree that democracy and voting is important. Most of-age Americans are entitled to vote, including the elderly in nursing homes, but often residents of nursing homes do not vote if no one makes voting or going to a polling place easy for them.

You may well be familiar with individualistic societies but may be unfamiliar with collective societies if you have only lived in the United States. Describing his childhood in a collectivist society, Joseph Lemasolai Lekuton, born Masai in Kenya, said about his...
childhood in this nomadic society, “In my tribe, the village is you, and you are the village. . . . Everyone older than you will tell you what to do. And you never defy their orders” (Court, 2003, p. 5). As adults, in mainstream U.S. culture, we enjoy personal freedom, independence from others, and take greater pride in personal achievements than do people in collectivist cultures. By the same token, we as Americans may be more vulnerable to insecurity, confusion, and loneliness. Rest assured that there are many other dimensions along which societies and cultures vary (Cohen, 2009; Nair, 2001), for example, masculine–feminine, respect for authority figures, and uncertainty avoidance (Matsumoto, 2007). You will read about some of these concepts in other chapters of this book.

The above discussion brings us to another issue related to self-direction—freedom.

The Ambiguity of Personal Freedom

Nobody has written more eloquently about the ambiguity of human freedom than Erich Fromm (1963), the distinguished psychoanalyst. His experience of growing up in Germany during the Nazi regime and his subsequent move to the United States gave him tremendous insight into the problems of totalitarianism and human freedom. For example, especially in individualistic societies, we have freedom to direct our lives—from the details of daily life to the more crucial choices such as what career to choose. On the other hand, the challenge of freedom can make us feel more anxious, insecure, and isolated. Fromm contends that such isolation may be so unbearable that many people are inclined to escape from the burden of freedom into new dependencies, such as looking to experts and the government for assistance or in our modern society, people are also becoming dependent on (sometimes addicted to) the Internet for assistance, for example, for health-related information (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2002) or to find new romantic partners.

The ambiguity of human freedom is especially evident when making important life choices, for example, who we want to be and how we want to live our lives. We may find ourselves coping by becoming anxious and “freezing up” in the face of important decisions. Another common strategy is drifting. Instead of choosing how to live, people simply drift along, either by living according to the status quo or by dropping out, becoming people whose lives are guided by no ties, codes, traditions, or major purposes. Another strategy is based on shared decision making, as in committee work, marriage, and family life, and assumed agreements among friends. Instead of really making a decision, people just talk until something happens. They presume a consensus, often never questioning it, but if things turn out badly, no one feels responsible. Each merely goes along. Another frequently used strategy for making choices is based on an appeal to some type of authority—an expert, a movement, a religion, the government, or some institution. Truly autonomous people rely on none of these strategies. Some psychologists call such autonomous, optimal people “self-actualized” individuals. (Self-actualization is described in more detail in several other chapters.) Autonomous or self-actualized individuals accept responsibility for their lives and carefully scrutinize the alternatives available to them. They also keep their eyes open and have the courage to admit when they are wrong and need to change. For example, many Russian writers working under communist rule in Soviet times, such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn, were examples of truly autonomous persons who made one decisive choice after another in order to maintain their personal integrity. They often made these decisions in the face of overwhelming criticism and the threat of severe punishment from their oppressive governments.
Taking Charge of Our Lives

Today, many people the world over are pursuing a similar odyssey of freedom. Much of the dissatisfaction that occurs in other countries reflects people's desire for the greater freedom and economic opportunity they see in the more economically advantaged societies. Many of the people who immigrate to the United States seek the very freedoms we take for granted—freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom of movement, for instance.

Indeed, surveys indicate that the majority of Americans feel they have more freedom and control over their lives than their parents did. With regard to the two individuals in our opening vignette, Karen probably experiences more freedom (e.g., mobility) than did Zachary, as well as more control (e.g., more laws). Most people today feel their parents' lives were hemmed in by all kinds of social, educational, and economic constraints that they themselves have escaped. For example, most of today's middle-aged Americans did not face the Great Depression and World War II, which delimited their parents' options. They believe they have more options in the important areas of education, work, sex, marriage, religion, family, friends, travel, possessions, where to live, and how to live.

Before you proceed further, make an honest assessment of whether you are actively taking charge of your life by completing the survey in Activity 1–1.

### Activity 1–1

**Do You Take Charge of Your Life?**

**Instructions:** For each statement below, circle T if the statement is generally true of you; circle F if the statement generally is not true of you.

1. I enjoy being interconnected to others—both friends and family members. **T**  **F**
2. Sometimes I have difficulty making the choices that make the most sense for my life. **T**  **F**
3. I have many options from which to select in terms of my education, career, social circle, etc. **T**  **F**
4. My friends are better than I am at making efficient and sound decisions. **T**  **F**
5. I get a great deal of satisfaction out of helping others less fortunate than I. **T**  **F**
6. If I have a choice, I much prefer to do the safe rather than the risky thing. **T**  **F**
7. I strongly feel that a promise is a promise and should not be broken. **T**  **F**
8. Difficult decisions daunt me because I have little confidence in my decisional abilities. **T**  **F**
9. No matter where I am (e.g., at work or at college), I accept my responsibilities.  

10. Sometimes I call in sick when I am healthy because I do not want to work or study. 

11. I’d invest my money in a risky but challenging venture. 

12. During times of stress, I feel as if my life is out of control. 

13. I am fully aware of who, where, and what I am as well as my personal goals. 

14. I am disturbed that some charities call me for donations and invade my privacy. 

15. When and if I ever borrow money, I make sure that I pay it back. 

16. I do not like it when others expect me to be the one to choose our leisure activity. 

SCORING: These items are intended as a self-assessment to stimulate you to think about how much you take charge of or direct your life. The even-numbered items are phrased in a negative direction, so if you answered “F” (false), you may have a “take-charge” attitude or exercise self-direction. The odd-numbered items are phrased such that a “T” (true) indicates agreement with an item demonstrating that you probably have self-direction.

Total number of _____ “Fs” for even numbered items _____  
+ Total number of _____ “Ts” for odd-numbered items _____  

= Grand total for self-determination _____

The higher your grand total, the more self-direction you may have. Now return to the regular reading with your score in mind. Pay attention to how and in what areas of self-direction you can improve.

Freedom, however, has its downside. Exercising our positive freedom means facing up to the necessity of decision making in our lives, especially the life choices that shape our destinies. At the same time, the fear of making the wrong decision in front of others is so great that many youths speak of “keeping my options open,” living in an “extended holding pattern,” and being “leery of commitment.” Much of this reaction is understandable in light of the uncertainties of our times; however, research has demonstrated that individuals extrinsically motivated by financial success, an appealing appearance, or social recognition have lower vitality and lower self-actualizing potential and report more physical (health) symptoms than individuals who are more intrinsically or internally inspired. Intrinsically motivated, autonomous, self-actualized individuals appear to be healthier, more self-accepting, and more community-minded (Kasser & Ryan, 1996) as well as better adjusted and less distressed (Baker, 2004).

Taking charge of our lives means that we can and must choose for ourselves, that is, we must be self-directed. A lack of decisiveness, by default, becomes its own decision. Also, we must make choices in a timely fashion so that our choices do not make us miss opportunities that lead to personal growth, which includes change or development in a desirable
direction, including the fulfillment of one’s inborn potential. On the other hand, it is fortunate that not all decisions are cast in stone. We can and often do change many decisions as we grow and mature—for example, change our college majors or our careers. Meanwhile, the realization that our decisions are only as good as the information they are based on reminds us again of the value of continuous learning and critical thinking.

Acting on our positive freedom also means assuming responsibility for our choices, without blaming others or fate for what happens to us. In fact, those who are self-actualized or internally directed experience less interpersonal distress (Baker, 2004) and more interpersonal closeness (Sheffield, Carey, Patenaude, & Lambert, 1995), perhaps because they are less likely to blame others. Interestingly, self-actualization correlates with altruism, or the desire to help others at cost to the helper (Sharma & Rosha, 1992).

Admittedly, we had no choice about being thrust into the world, but we have a great deal of choice in the manner in which we live. However, we often hear people say things such as “I can’t help it because that’s the way I am” or “Naturally I’m this way because of the way I grew up.” These people fail to realize that free choice and responsibility go hand in hand. As a constant reminder of this fact, Viktor Frankl (1978) suggested that the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast be supplemented by the Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast.

Self-realization also involves taking calculated risks and making commitments in spite of uncertainty. Where would the world be without the risks taken by, for example, Thomas Edison, Mikhail Gorbachev, the Dalai Lama, and Bill Gates? Personal growth involves stepping into unfamiliar and potentially risky situations, thereby leaving us more vulnerable to hurt and disappointment. Perfectionists are especially prone not to take risks and to be satisfied with low levels of actualization. Self-actualizers are more tolerant of failure (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & Mosher, 1991). With regard to these issues, it is important to ask yourself the following questions: How self-directed are you? How does perfectionism interfere with your taking risks? How actualized are you? How open are you to new experiences?

The decision to grow or actualize our potential often has to be made in spite of risks and therefore requires courage. This is the “courage to be,” that is, the courage to affirm ourselves and our possibilities in spite of risks. On the other hand, we run a risk whenever we avoid growing. Each time we pass up an opportunity to develop a new skill or when we value security over challenge, we run the risk of becoming stagnant or succumbing to boredom. When we habitually suppress or deny the inherent growth tendency of humans, we risk becoming maladaptive, sometimes in obvious ways, sometimes in subtle ways, sometimes immediately, or sometimes later in life. Fortunately, higher education and continual learning, mechanisms for growth that you as well as Zachary and Karen are taking advantage of, help individuals self-actualize (Barnes & Srinivas, 1993; MacKay & Kuh, 1994). One of the fathers of humanistic psychology, Abraham Maslow (1968), once observed that many of the characteristic disorders of our time such as the “stunted person,” the “amoral person,” or the “apathetic person” result from the fundamental failure to grow.

**Living in Today’s Individualistic Society**

Interestingly, the times in which we live afford us a more supportive environment because of the technological advances that bring friends and family on the other side of the continent “closer” to us. In fact, we can twitter a whole group of supportive people at once by merely pressing a few buttons on our handheld devices. Just as important, though, is the increased number of hazards in our social and physical environments: We
meet more people, some of whom are highly critical of us and judgmental; we become bewildered by the increasing number of available consumer choices; and we worry about the proliferation of hazards in our environment, from threats of child victimization on the World Wide Web to pandemics such as H1N1 (Swine) flu and AIDS. These, in turn, heighten the challenge of self-direction.

The cumulative impact of these social changes has given rise to newer social values and newer rules by which people live in comparison to those of Zachary’s generation. Generally, these changes mean greater interest in shaping the environment to meet our needs (i.e., increased personal control) rather than society’s needs and goals. To you it may appear true that many people are preoccupied with themselves today. Especially to our international visitors, Americans appear to be rather self-absorbed in several ways. There is often great impatience in Westerners to satisfy one’s own goals. Individuals scoff when told they need to “pay your dues” through hard work to achieve success in a career or happiness in a marriage. They want success and happiness NOW. Or to paraphrase the more self-centered seekers, “I want it all—right now!” The “future” orientation of earlier generations like Zachary’s—with the assumption that things need to get better for future generations—appears to have been superseded by a “now” orientation, by living solely in the present, where the collective future is merely a lurking shadow in the back of our minds.

Still another change is the greater assertiveness of individuals, who seem more concerned with their personal rights than with social responsibilities. As a result, more individuals today appear to be relentlessly pursuing their own interests and goals, at the risk of violating the rights of others. When conflicts of interest do arise, individuals are less willing to deny themselves anything to accommodate or compromise with others, as if adhering to some new moral principle—“I have a duty to myself, not to you or society.” Road rage is an apt example of obstinately pursuing one’s own needs at the expense of others. Luckily, Zachary never experienced road rage, but Karen has.

**THEMES OF PERSONAL GROWTH**

**Living with Contradictions and Uncertainty**

Not just Zachary and Karen, but all of us face the challenge of reconciling old rules with new rules and old values with new values. Many of us feel we must honor the old values of hard work, frugality, and moderation to complete an education and secure our careers and, thus, the means to enjoy the new values associated with personal pleasure and freedom (Moen & Roehling, 2005). In many ways these two sets of values contradict each other, making it difficult to reconcile them. For example, we know we must work to support our families, but we also want to drive an expensive convertible car and experience the thrill of the wind blowing through our hair—a symbol of independence and freedom. This task of reconciling the old and the new is hard enough for reasonably well-educated and well-informed individuals. It is even more confusing and unsettling to the less educated, who anticipate more dramatic and negative social changes than do college-educated people.

Those of us who seek guidance about personal growth from popular self-help books, television shows that entertain more than they educate, and movements that blend pop psychology with quasi-religious thought do not always fare well. Many of these sources oversimplify the process of personal and social change, generating grossly
unrealistic and disappointing results. In contrast, a good textbook on scientific psychology can provide sound principles of personal development and growth as well as guidance related to self-direction and social responsibility. Throughout this book we attempt to show how the principles and findings of contemporary psychology can help us better understand ourselves and others and, thus, to cope more effectively with our environment and fulfill more of our potential.

This statement does not mean that personal growth can be achieved by simply reading a book on the subject. Neither does mere exposure to scientific knowledge or interesting examples guarantee that you will use the information. Now, let’s look further at some other issues related to seeking self-direction.

**Continuity and Change**

A key issue for psychologists and the public alike is the extent to which people change over a lifetime. Do our personalities really change, or do they remain stable? Or do we simply and naturally mellow with age? Do we change in fits and starts or gradually? What makes us change—many small experiences or cataclysmic events?

A generation ago psychologists and the public assumed that genes and early experiences were the decisive influences on development, so that once we reached adulthood we tended to remain the same. Then, during the 1960s and 1970s, new findings as well as social trends suggested that people tend to continue growing throughout their adult lives. Today, professionals acknowledge that **both continuity and change** are important to development.

Robert McCrae and Paul Costa (1994, 2003) have discovered some evidence for the stability of personality throughout the life span. The highest degree of stability was found in the domain of introversion–extroversion, which reflects gregariousness, warmth, and assertiveness. There is almost as much stability in the area of “neuroticism,” which includes such traits as depression and hostility. Thus, individuals who were expressive and outgoing in their teens are apt to remain that way in adulthood; those who were inhibited and shy in their teens tend to remain inhibited and shy. Similarly, longitudinal studies, which follow the same individuals over a long time period, indicate only slight decreases over the course of adulthood in anxiety, hostility, and impulsiveness.

Psychologists supporting the stability thesis state that even when individuals do change because of personal maturation or life experiences, the unique differences among people remain. This means that a rather impulsive 20-year-old like Karen may be a bit less impulsive by the time she is 55, but she is still likely to be more impulsive than her agemates at any given time. In addition, as people grow older, the stability of their personalities becomes more evident. Thus, there is more stability of personality from 30 to 40 than there is from 20 to 30 years of age (Pfaffenberger, 2005). Part of the reason for increased stability with age is that we tend to select and stay in environments and marry people that help sustain our traits (Caspi & Herbener, 1990).

Other researchers, while acknowledging the importance of stability, emphasize the variability or change that occurs with development (Pfaffenberger, 2005). They point out that **only certain traits** have been shown to be relatively stable, most notably introversion–extroversion, anxiety, and depression. These researchers suggest that people are more likely to change in other respects, especially self-esteem, sense of personal mastery or control over their environment, and values. Recently, Dweck (2008) argued that personal beliefs (e.g., about the malleability of personality) can play a significant role in altering personality across the life span. Individuals who believe that they can change (e.g., have a malleable view of personality), are more open to learning, more willing to confront challenges, and are better able to bounce back from failures. Those who believe
that their traits are fixed have a more difficult time facing challenges such as stressful business tasks or conflict-laden relationships. The emphasis on the potential for change has been embraced by those who want to foster change, from weight watchers to social watchers, all of whom stress openness to change throughout the course of adulthood.

The tension between continuity and change is found not only in academic debates but also in each of us. How much personal growth or change in a desirable direction we want depends greatly on the different priorities we assign to stability or change, that is, how much we want to change and how differently we want to live our lives. Thus, people with traditional values tend to exhibit a high degree of stability in their lives unless something happens to make them change. For them, the events most likely to cause change are usually quite dramatic, such as an unwanted divorce, the death of a child, failure in one’s career, or witnessing a traumatic event. In contrast, those who put more value on personal growth may continue changing to a greater extent throughout their lives unless they become stuck at a particular developmental milestone. For instance, a coal miner who spends 10 hours a day under the earth for 30 years may have little opportunity for personal growth. If you, on the other hand, value change, you probably have ample opportunities to experience change and personal growth.

**The Experience of Personal Growth**

To believe we can change is one thing. To pursue and actively achieve personal change is something else. Think about all the times you have vowed to exercise but didn’t or vowed to quit smoking cigarettes and failed. These are but small instances of attempts to change. Like all patterns of development, our inner experience of growth tends to be uneven, with spurts and plateaus. We may be willing to try out something new one minute and retreat to the familiar the next. Because we experience our inner world more as a continuous flow of ideas, feelings, and meanings, we are more apt to realize that we’ve grown in retrospect than while we’re in the midst of a particular growth cycle.

The experience of growth tends to follow a three-phase cycle:

1. **Acknowledging change.** Growth usually begins with the acknowledgment of change. Actually, changes occur all the time, but we’re not always aware of them. A constant awareness of change would be too disrupting to our daily lives. Instead, we strive to construct an image of ourselves and our world that pictures reality as under our control and more stable than it really is. As a result, we become more acutely aware of changes at some moments than at others. Sometimes, we become aware of change rather suddenly, for example, by receiving an unexpected compliment or criticism. Taking on new responsibilities, such as a new marriage, parenthood, or a promotion at work, forces us to acknowledge change, too. Karen’s graduation from college and her entry into medical school will force her to acknowledge change. The common denominator in all these experiences is the realization that things are different from what they were—or what we believed or expected they would be.

2. **A sense of dissonance or dissatisfaction.** Whether the awareness of change leads to growth depends on how we react. Sometimes we may respond to change defensively, with little awareness of our real feelings—positive or negative. In contrast, when someone feels disappointment, he or she actually may be aroused or motivated to seek further change or confront the challenge of disappointment. Thus, the growth cycle can often be triggered by disappointment and failure as well as by success.

This phase of growth (dissonance) is inevitably accompanied by a certain degree of anxiety and discomfort. When our motive for growth proceeds out of a sense of challenge...
or mastery, we may be more stimulated and less apprehensive about the outcome, as when Zachary, Karen’s ancestor, decided to break in his own horse—out of a need for accomplishment but with some trepidation—rather than let his older brother do it as was usual. But when our motive springs from profound dissatisfaction with ourselves, our feelings tend to be more agonizing.

3. Reorganizing our experience. In conventional psychological terms, reorganizing is often defined as acquiring new ideas and then altering our attitudes, behaviors, and values in response. In some instances, such as the discovery that most students like Karen, Zachary, and you feel anxious about examinations, additional insight may alter our understanding of ourselves or others. The additional insight may be that we are aware of our own largely unconscious processes, such as realizing that our chronic sense of anxiety during tests really masks an undue fear of criticism and failure. Or we may adopt a new attitude toward another person, becoming more willing to listen to someone’s criticism because we know that the person wants to help rather than hurt us. Growth may also take the form of new self-perceptions, such as increased self-acceptance and confidence from an achievement like Karen’s earning a medical degree, which made her feel that she was indeed smarter than she thought. The main point is that each inner adjustment or change we make affects the whole of our experience, so that growth consists of the continuous reorganization of that experience.

Beyond Individualism

There still exists in America a language of individualism that limits the way people think. For example, we have long celebrated “independence” on July 4, but we are only now slowly recognizing our interdependence on others via “Make a Difference Day.” Being responsible to the self alone, many Americans still act independently of any cultural or social influence. As a result, we are still somewhat less committed to the common purposes of society than we are to the self. This is in sharp contrast to collectivist societies or earlier periods of American life—say, in Zachary’s lifetime—in which self-orientation was held in check by strong ties to the family, church, and community. We are, however, very good at “coming together” with others in times of crisis. Witness how the whole nation pulled together when the World Trade Center was bombed.

Terrorist acts and national disasters sometimes stimulate collectivism in Americans who are otherwise fairly individualistic.
A major reassessment of the search for self-fulfillment may be giving rise to a more realistic view of life and personal fulfillment. Millions of Americans are discovering, often through such painful experiences as terrorist attacks or watching their adult children or parents become unemployed, that preoccupation with their own personal needs is not a direct path to fulfillment. Americans are learning that they cannot disregard the rest of the world. The heart of this new outlook is the realization that personal fulfillment can be achieved only in relation to others—through a web of shared meanings that transcend the isolated individual. Personal fulfillment in the deeper sense requires commitments that endure over long periods of time and perhaps require self-sacrifice. The term commitment shifts the focus away from unduly individualistic notions of the self, either self-denial or self-fulfillment, toward the more inclusive “self connected to others.” This is a positive change, because almost all of our activity occurs in relationships, groups, and community, structured by institutions and interpreted by cultural meaning. Activity 1–2 is designed to help you discover the extent of your own individualism in our interdependent world. When you have finished the activity, ask yourself if you need to be more interconnected with your community and the rest of the world.

As we’ve seen, human fulfillment is more complex than popularly thought and requires a better balance between the interests of self and of society.

**Activity 1–2**

**How Individualistic Are You?**

Psychologists have figured out some very clever ways to research people’s behaviors and attitudes without directly asking or observing them. Once a person is approached by a psychologist, the study and data can become contaminated by virtue of the very fact that people know they are being studied. For example, if you knew I wanted to know about your individualism (e.g., selfish tendencies), you might try to guess the answers to my questions rather than give me an honest assessment of your individualistic tendencies.

Psychological scientists, then, turn to indirect methods. One indirect method is the **archival method**, where scientists examine existing data such as historical documents that were fashioned without anyone knowing they are the subject of study. You have created many such historical documents that have never been studied. Go back to your email account, your diary, letters you have written to your friends and family, or some other written document developed by you. Count how many times pronouns related to yourself such as I, my, me, mine, etc. occur and how many times pronouns such as you or we or they (or pronouns indicating that you were taking into account another’s feelings, needs, or desires) occur.

PRONOUNS RELATED TO SELF ______

PRONOUNS RELATED TO OTHERS ______

Which type of pronouns prevailed? Are pronouns indicating the importance of others more predominant or are pronouns related to you more predominant? In terms of individualism and social connectedness, what do your results suggest about you?
We began the chapter by describing how rapid technological and social changes are having far-reaching effects throughout the world. The revolution in communication, in particular, is giving rise to a global outlook in which people in many countries are influenced by what they see happening in other countries.

Economically advantaged nations, such as the United States, are moving into a postindustrial era in which the service industries are becoming dominant, and there is a premium on intellectual and technical knowledge. Similarly, the information age drives us to create, process, and distribute information in different ways and with a wider variety of people. Social forecasters admit we live in uncertain times, but they tend to have an optimistic view of the future. The biggest challenge is how to prepare people to live and work in the new information-driven society that demands high-tech skills and more education.

**The Challenge of Self-Direction**

Living in a rapidly changing society poses an even greater challenge to the self-direction of individuals than was the case in the past. As Fromm reminds us, we have been more successful in achieving freedom “from” traditional authorities than in using this freedom “for” actualizing our individual destinies. The challenge of self-direction is so great that we tend to escape from it by looking to the experts for decisions on important choices or conforming to the crowd or simply drifting. In contrast, taking charge of our lives means facing up to the importance of decision making, taking calculated risks for the sake of growth, and assuming full responsibility for our lives.

The new rules in today’s individualistic societies accentuate the challenge of self-direction. As a result, people are increasingly questioning the old rules that emphasize social conformity and self-denial. Instead, individuals are busily pursuing their individual rights and, in varying degrees, self-fulfillment. A major change is that people want and expect more out of life in return for their efforts.

**Themes of Personal Growth**

The search for self-fulfillment creates a predicament for the individual as well as the nation, challenging us to reconcile old and new values. People looking to self-help books for advice tend to find an oversimplified idea of self-fulfillment, leading to unrealistic expectations that end in disappointment. In contrast, the field of psychology offers sound principles and tested knowledge that may help to achieve realistic self-direction and growth.

According to psychology, the tendencies toward both continuity and change are present in each of us. How much you and others change depends greatly on the different priorities you assign to stability or change and whether you, in fact, believe you can change. At the same time, we live in an era in which personal growth occurs more widely than before.
The subjective experience of growth involves a three-phase cycle: (1) the acknowledgment of change within ourselves or our environment, (2) a sense of dissonance or dissatisfaction within, which in turn leads to (3) reorganizing our experience in some way, such as adopting a new attitude toward ourselves or others. Today, however, a major reassessment of the self-fulfillment movement is under way, giving rise to a more realistic view of life and personal fulfillment. The core of this new approach is the call for a realignment of the interests of self and society so that personal fulfillment can be realized in relation to others—through a web of shared meanings that transcend the isolated individual.

**Self-Test**

1. Early American society can be described as
   a. ruggedly individualistic.   c. self-directed.
   b. agrarian and collective.   d. materialistic.

2. Who suffers most from technophobia?
   a. mid-level managers.   c. children.
   b. white-collar workers.   d. minorities and women.

3. What statement is true?
   a. Minorities generally tend to avoid all forms of technology.
   b. Computers are still the technology of choice for connecting with others.
   c. African Americans and Hispanics are taking advantage of mobile technologies at higher rates than Whites.
   d. There are still large numbers of Americans without some form of technology at their disposal.

4. An individualistic society
   a. is consensual.
   b. looks upon societal gain as important.
   c. is exemplified by American culture.
   d. is the same as a collectivist society.

5. Which group is increasing fastest in the United States?
   a. Hispanics   c. Asians
   b. African Americans   d. Whites

6. Which of the following characteristics is the least likely to change throughout adulthood?
   a. Extroversion   c. Depression
   b. Anxiety   d. Neuroticism

7. A subjective experience of growth begins with
   a. a sense of dissonance.   c. a commitment to change.
   b. acknowledging change.   d. reorganizing experiences.

8. The second stage of personal growth is
   a. a sense of dissonance.   c. a commitment to change.
   b. acknowledging change.   d. reorganizing experiences.
9. American society is typified by
   a. inattention to societal needs.
   b. a need for relatedness.
   c. personal inability to make decisions.
   d. slower rates of social change than in the past.

10. The contemporary reassessment of the self-fulfillment movement suggests that personal fulfillment can be realized only
    a. by educated people.
    b. during middle or late adulthood.
    c. in relation to others.
    d. by perfectionistic people.

**Exercises**

1. **Social change.** What two or three societal changes are having the greatest impact on your life (e.g., changes in technology, the economy)? Write a page or so about how your life is affected by these changes. For example, think about how a computer has altered your academic, business, and personal life. Are most of the societal changes having a negative or positive impact on your life? Are you coping with the changes appropriately? Are the changes helping you grow?

2. **Change as a challenge or threat.** Select some change that has occurred in your environment recently, such as a new professor, a marital engagement, or layoffs at work. Then write a page or so describing how you feel about this change, especially whether you see it as a challenge or a threat and why.

3. **Identify your level of interdependence.** Identify at least one important aspect of your life, such as a job, a friendship, or marriage. Then describe in a few paragraphs how much you’re prepared to give to this relationship and how much you expect in return. Are your expectations fair? If the give and take is unbalanced, how do you think your expectations will affect your relationships?

4. **How important is self-fulfillment to you?** Think about what you do that is fulfilling. What are your life goals? Are they generally other-centered or self-centered, and is this adaptive and growth-oriented? What do you do to actively meet these goals?

5. **Self-fulfillment and personal and social involvement.** Select some area of your life that has been very gratifying to you (an accomplishment, relationship, etc.) and describe the extent to which your sense of fulfillment depended on involvement with others.

**Questions for Self-Reflection**

1. Are you more optimistic about your own personal future than that of our society or the world?

2. Are you so concerned about keeping your options open that you may suffer from the inability to make decisions? Are you too perfectionistic?
3. How much control do you feel you have over your life? How much control do you think you need? Are you a self-directed person?

4. Would you agree that many of the ground rules in our society have changed from one century to the next? How so?

5. Have you met people who act as if there are no rules—that anything goes? What are such people like?

6. How important are self-fulfillment values to you?

7. Do you expect more out of life than your parents did?

8. Can you remember a difficult time in your life and, in retrospect, realize it was a time of growth?

9. Would you agree that personal fulfillment is achieved mostly in and through our relationships with others?

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

RECOMMENDED READINGS

BUCHER, D. (2009). *Diversity consciousness: Opening our minds to people, cultures and opportunities*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall. This is a readable book that incorporates current research and works by other authors to help the reader move to better understanding and respect for diversity.

FREDRICKSON, B. (2009). *Positivity: Groundbreaking research reveals how to embrace the hidden strength of positive emotions, overcome negative, and thrive*. New York: Crown Publishing Group. A leading researcher shares her insights on this new school of thought in psychology that is turning psychologists’ attention from negative concepts to more positive concepts about the self and the world.


MOEN, P., & ROEHLING, P. (2004). *The career mystique: Cracks in the American Dream*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. The authors review the American dream of hard work and frugality turning into success. Given the changing world and the many uncertainties of modern life, the authors claim that today the dream is a myth.

WEBSITES AND THE INTERNET

http://www.apa.org/psychnet A site designed to provide lots of information about psychology on a wide range of topics.

http://www.culturalstudies.net A location where popular American culture in its ever-changing forms is tracked. There are links to other cultural studies sites as well as information on other countries and cultures. The site is designed to celebrate diversity.
http://www.cpsr.org  A site supported by computer professionals concerned about the responsible use of technology in society. Their motto is apt: Technology is driving the future; it is up to us to do the steering.

http://www.ufs.org  Interested in the future or what the world will look like in several years? This site has predictions and other information that will interest, motivate, and sometimes startle you.

http://www.sierraclub.org  America’s oldest, largest, and most influential grassroots environmental organization.